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You're Only Six Once

The swearing-in ceremony is over. The staff briefings begin and stacks of reports and memos climb higher on the desk. Around the corner is the budget balancing act of meeting people's needs and protecting their hard-earned dollars. For a rookie county councilmember public life has begun.

As one of the new crop of local elected decisionmakers in the region, it is daunting to realize all the problems that must be tackled. However, one experience from last fall's campaign marathon stands out. I spent four hours with a mother and her two preschoolers as we took three buses from her apartment in Takoma Park to the Health and Human Services offices in Rockville. A high school dropout, married at 17 and now separated, she wants to work but needs child care and transportation help. While circumstances have led her to need public assistance, this mother wants the very same life for her son and daughter that we all want for our own children.

That experience crystallized for me the urgency of taking on the priorities that will create the best possible future for children in Montgomery County. However, make no mistake; we face incredible challenges creating that future.

While our county is rich, many of its children are not. Almost one fourth of the students in our public schools are at or near poverty based on their qualification for free and reduced price meals. They speak over 100 different languages creating enormous challenges for teaching. Almost 30% of our third-graders do not meet school system

reading standards and we know that children who can't read properly by third grade are at risk their whole lives.

More and more school children enter our doors as enrollment continues to soar. It will cost almost \$17 million just to provide for the 3100 additional students projected for our schools next year. Too many of those students go to school in overcrowded and outdated buildings. Almost one-third of our 185 schools are more than 30 years old and have never been modernized. If the pace of funding is not accelerated, some schools will have to go 50 years or more before they get the modernizations needed for instructional, technology, and physical plant updates.

Far too many of our children live with family violence. From 1996 to 1998 the number of investigations of child abuse and neglect in our county has risen over 45 percent. Child welfare staff, who must make critical decisions about the safety of our children, carry enormous workloads.

We must not wait to take on these challenges. If ever there were a time to be bold, it is now. We have a robust local economy thanks to the momentum of the stock market, the national economy, and sound economic development strategies by state and local government leaders. Over the last four years the County Council and County Executive Duncan gave a sense of urgency to improving our county's business climate and our economy is stronger because of it.

We must create a sense of urgency in tackling the most pressing needs of our kids. It requires bold thinking, learning from successes elsewhere, and the will to act.

New mothers who need it should get home visits from nurses or other staff with information on parenting, child development, nutrition, and any needed community and medical services. We know that these efforts prevent future problems like child abuse.

Children who are currently victims of abuse and neglect cannot wait and we need adequate child welfare staff to protect them. Currently, the State of Maryland, with this responsibility, has not allocated enough staff to meet its own standards for worker caseload ratios in any area of child welfare in Montgomery County.

With our current economic resources we can invest in prudent one-time capital expenditures such as tackling the backlog of school modernizations. Now is also the time to enact a multi-year effort to reduce class size in the critical early years of kindergarten through third grade. I remember the excitement when my six-year-old could first make out the words on the page. That ability to read unlocks the doors to all the other subjects. It and all other subjects for our youngest schoolchildren should be taught in a small, effective learning environment.

We must also look to expand after-school programs to prevent juvenile crime, open community libraries on Sundays, and roll out our successful school-based health and human services to other communities.

Yes, these efforts require funds and we must harness, not only government resources, but also those of our business, faith, education, and health care leaders. Over 11,000 children will be born in Montgomery County each year and too many of them will fall through the cracks. The future cost in treating the adult who was abused as a child or who never learned to read properly is far, far, greater than resources spent now.

The mother and children who rode three buses need help now. The six-year-old who finds the magic of making out the words on the page has a brief window of opportunity. He's only six once and he cannot wait.